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# An English *Magic Flute* at San Francisco Opera

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*By Jeffery S. McMillan, 02 July 2012*

In keeping with its summer season of novelties, San Francisco Opera have produced a new English-language production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. Advertisements for the production showed baritone Nathan Gunn in a green, full-body leotard as a sort of frogman of a Papageno, leaping in the air and wearing a manic expression. This image on posters and direct mailing salvos implied a *Romper Room*-styled *Magic Flute* was coming to town: bring the kids for some good-ol' family fun. What actually arrived was a visually spare staging,

**Reviewed at War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco on 29 June 2012**

## PROGRAMME

**Mozart**, *The Magic Flute* (Die Zauberflöte), K620

some bawdy humor for the bigger kids, and a talented cast, making a strong case for comedic opera in the vernacular.



Nathan Gunn (Papageno)

© Cory Weaver

Mozart wrote his 1791 Singspiel to be understood without the veil of courtly respectability that dictated opera be performed in Italian for the German-speaking citizenry of Vienna. Hearing a performance of *Die Zauberflöte* in an American house inevitably leads to that pesky

disconnect between the comedy onstage and the words as they appear translated above the stage or in titles panels on seat backs—something the Austrians of Mozart's time never had to deal with. Only gross gestures and exaggerated physicality earn authentic laughs; punch-lines are typically read before the actors actually say them. Performing the work in English gives back to Mozart the humor and fun that is often charitably feigned by respectful audiences. The composer's humanity and brilliance come through in this magnificent work no matter what language it is sung and spoken in, but the merriment has a higher hit rate when the principals can engage the audience without a language barrier.

San Francisco Opera general manager David Gockley developed a witty and contemporary translation to bridge the gap in this new production, and it's a winner. Updating the spoken dialogue for the sake of comedic immediacy, the exchanges between characters and contemporary references to the economy and green commerce earned laughs rather than eliciting a polite, programmed response. I cannot remember laughing more at an opera performance! Most of the humor, naturally, originated with Papageno's innocence and randy inclinations, which Gunn communicated with some well-timed ham. The audience clearly enjoyed this Papageno's sense of ecological responsibility when he spoke of his career in "sustainable bird catching." Hopefully whenever this production is revived, Gockley and company will revisit the libretto and, in Gilbert and Sullivan fashion, bring it up to date again for a new audience and

## PERFORMERS

San Francisco Opera Company

Rory Macdonald, *Conductor*

Harry Silverstein, *Director*

Heidi Stober, *Pamina*

Alek Shrader, *Tamino*

Nathan Gunn, *Papageno*

Kristinn Sigmundsson, *Sarastro*

Albina Shagimuratova, *Sarastro*

Greg Fedderly, *Monostatos*

Nadine Sierra, *Papagena*

David Pittsinger, *The Speaker (Der Sprecher)*

Norman Reinhardt, *Tamino*

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*Gavin Dixon, 30th August*

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cast.

Visually, the projection-driven production was spare and abstract, like a Mondrian painting. A few props and the physical shapes of the singers provided the only three-dimensional texture in the playing space. There were no sets to speak of, only a flat stage and a few vertical drops for projected patterns and animation. A bit more architectural complexity crept in during temple scenes when skinny, column-like surfaces were lowered near the footlights. The production has been touted as the "first all-digital production in San Francisco Opera history," and Japanese sculptor and installation artist Jun Kaneko's designs emphasized simplicity through minimalism. The animations—crayon-like lines of color being drawn onto the flat surfaces and black discs emanating outward like the uniform debris of a slow-moving explosion—rarely seemed directly tied to the stage action or music, and at the end of the evening went on changing imperceptibly in the background. There were a few moments when the animation drew attention. During Tamino's first aria, about Pamina's portrait, multi-colored rings unhurriedly cascaded about him, providing a nice effect (and evoking the impending Olympic games) and the Act II trials by fire and water were beautifully accompanied with simple, evocative scenes, but otherwise the line drawings and subtly shifting pastel backgrounds proved an inadequate substitute for scenery and props. The simplicity of the design grew wearisome for this reviewer, and I found myself wishing for bolder colors or at least some more rings. Kaneko's costumes were more quirky and interesting than his projections. The beasts that Tamino tames with his flute were spotted ovals with legs on the bottom and claptraps on top. He outfitted the principals well, especially the Queen of the Night, whose costumes were imaginative and stunning to behold.

Tenor Alek Shrader made for a handsome and ardent Tamino. Well known for his 2007 triumph at the Metropolitan Opera National Council Finals, captured in the film *The Audition*, Shrader has spent the last five years building a career focused on the long-term. He sang beautifully, showing no signs of strain or effort, and exhibited a talent for comedy. Heidi Stober sang Pamina with a full, rich tone that belied the soubrette repertory enumerated in her bio. In her SFO debut, Albina Shagimuratova made a tremendous impression as the Queen of the Night. The role typically dazzles and *Magic Flute* listeners regularly leave whistling one of her two arias, but on this occasion the Russian soprano nailed the runs and money notes so assuredly and with such verve that the rapturous response was as much for her as for Mozart. Immediately after her first aria, Shrader exclaimed "Was that for real?"—provoking a huge laugh, not so much out of appreciation for the oh-so-contemporary quip, but because it helped us all remember that our jaws were still in the dropped position. Kristinn Sigmundsson bellowed nobly as Sarastro, showing that the lowest reaches of the role are a territory that only a few basses in the world—and Sigmundsson is one of them—are capable of singing audibly in a theater like the War Memorial Opera House. Second-year Adler Fellow Nadine Sierra was an agile and peppy Papagena. Greg Fedderly made the creepy lecher Monostatos into a hilarious character, moving with Jack Black-like commitment when under the spell of

## A *Carmen* for the 21st century

*Max Woods, 1st September*

While there are jarring visual aspects to this production of Bizet's *Carmen* at the SemperOper, Dresden, this was an enjoyable performance which is a feast for the ears, if not the eyes.



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Macdonald, Rory

Gunn, Nathan

Shagimuratova, Albina

San Francisco Opera Company

Reinhardt, Norman

Stober, Heidi

Fedderly, Greg

Pittsinger, David

Shrader, Alek

Silverstein, Harry

Sierra, Nadine

Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute), K620

Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus

Papageno's bells.

The orchestra played with exuberance under the direction of Rory Macdonald, and, combined with the able cast on stage, showed that Mozart does not need extravagant scenery to be successful with a contemporary audience.

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